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Search for munitions may delay Surf City beach opening

Munitions search may put project past Memorial Day

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(Published: March 23, 2007)

SURF CITY — Surf City beaches may — or may not — be open by Memorial Day, a spokesman for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said Thursday.

"We're doing our best to get the project done by Memorial Day, but that could change either way. The project could go into June or be done quicker," spokesman Khaalid Walls said.

The discovery of military munitions on the beaches earlier this month contributed to the delay of the beach-replenishment project's completion, Walls said.

The corps is in the phase of hiring a contractor to come to the beaches and conduct a geophysical investigation and electromagnetic survey, he said. The electromagnetic survey will search for any remaining military munitions on the beach. The survey should start next Friday. This geophysical investigation of the beach could take as long as two weeks, he said.

"The munitions could potentially be dangerous. This is all in the interest of public safety. We're encouraging the public and businesses to help keep people off the beach," Walls said.

A receptionist and another employee at Island Realty in Surf City were nearly speechless Thursday afternoon when they learned that the beaches could be closed on Memorial Day. Upon learning of the replenishment project's setback, they frantically passed along the information to others inside the office.

"That's why I wasn't for the beach project. I'm shocked. I had no idea about any of this," said Bob Van Buren, a sales representative at Island Realty.

He said he was surprised to hear it could take until Memorial Day to complete the beach survey. He said he has seen security armed with binoculars to keep people off the beaches.

"The last I heard last week was that the beaches would be done in about a week," he said. "I don't know what it takes to get it ready, but I am surprised it will take that long. What's next? Are they just going to throw in the towel on the beach project?"

Van Buren said he is not sure whether a late opening of the borough's beaches would affect the rental market. He said that if people are not allowed on the beach, there will be many disgruntled homeowners and renters.

"People are here for the beach, but if word gets out, it will have the biggest impact on the prime-time season renters," Van Buren said.

For Van Buren, the prime time for rentals is July, August and September. He said he does not have many rentals for Memorial Day.

"It's the start of the season. It will affect businesses the most, but a lot of others, like vacationers, will be ticked off," he said.

Mario Aversa, an owner of Mario's Italian Market on Long Beach Boulevard in Surf City, said he is concerned about the beaches opening late, but does not think it will hurt his business.

Mario's is open year-round, Thursday through Sunday. Aversa apologized Thursday afternoon for the empty case that is usually stocked with trays of freshly prepared Italian foods.

Aversa's wife, Phyllis, spoke quietly with their sons Mario and Pete in the kitchen. Both sons were visibly upset and wanted to know when the news came out that the beaches could be closed. The couple runs the business with their sons.

"I can't believe this," Pete Aversa said.

"I hope for the vacationers that they get to use the beaches. I have one guy that comes in here who pays \$50,000 a week to rent a 20-room place in Surf City," Aversa said.

Mario's gets a lot of traffic from the beach during the summer months, he said. "They're lining up outside at 10 in the morning to bring sandwiches and drinks back to the beach. We sell a couple hundred heroes everyday."

Phyllis Aversa said she thinks that because people know her family and love Mario's food, they will come regardless of whether the beaches are open.

"If they open way after Memorial Day and it goes into June, it could be a problem. But it doesn't have to be a bad, negative thing," she said. "We'll be able to tell by our books if it affects us. We were just looking at the books from Memorial Day last year and we wonder how we did it without help."

Walls said the electromagnetic survey will be conducted from South Fifth Street to North 24th Street. Phyllis Aversa frowned Thursday afternoon when she learned that the survey would stretch across most of Surf City.

"As we complete and clear portions of the beach, they will be opened," Walls said. "We're still aiming for a completion date before Memorial Day."

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